



## THE LONG GOODNIGHT

The nights are drawing in and it is cold outside. Christmas will soon be upon us. There are many temptations and distractions during this festive season. This is why it is important to establish a bedtime routine for your children: a good routine that caters for the well-being of the parents as well as that of the child.

Bedtime can be a difficult time. Children are tired out from the activities of the day, the dark nights see them cooped up in the house all evening. Parents are shattered after a long and maybe very stressful day parenting or working. This is a demanding time for all concerned as energy levels are low and stress levels high. It should be the best time of the day with all the family together, but often it is not. For many, bedtime can become really stressful as hopes of a peaceful evening are lost amidst the tantrums and tears.

Parents need to have some peace in the evening for themselves, whether to relax after a hard day at the office or simply to get some childfree time. For many couples the evening is the only time they have together. It should be precious 'us' time, a reward for long hours of toil, a time to look after themselves and meet their own needs. This period of self-care is essential; it restores energy levels and increases self-esteem. Time given to yourself is as important as time given to your children. Yet many seem to spend this part of the evening responding to one crisis after another.

A bedtime routine of bathing, tucking in and story-telling can create this essential parental time. With a carefully worked-out schedule, both parent and child will know what should be happening and when. Make time when you are not tired and write out a schedule. Do it when you are in a positive frame of mind and ask your child to help so it becomes teamwork. Think about its content and structure, breaking it down into small achievable actions.

Think about the goals and outcomes that you want for you and your children. One of your goals could be to build in 'me time', like time to watch television or do something that you enjoy. Another could be creating space for that personal one-to-one time with your child before they go to sleep. Plan and delegate responsibilities between yourself, your partner and your children. Make sure it is a win-win situation in which everyone gains.

When you are planning this schedule, take into account your frame of mind during that time of evening. If you are generally tired and stressed, you may be negative towards your children. Be aware of this and the importance of speaking to your children in positive terms. Ask yourself, 'What can I do to be more positive at this time?' Is there some reward you can give yourself or small breaks where you can catch your breath? Be creative.

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Routines only work if you stick with them. This might prove difficult at first, as it is with anything new, but after a while it will just become... routine. After a while you will start seeing results for you and your children. With the long winter nights, do not be tempted to alter this routine by putting the children to bed earlier. Whatever you do, do not send your child early to bed as a punishment. Bedtime should be associated with positive actions, not negative ones; the bedroom should be a welcoming place. Every so often you can break the routine as a treat, especially as Christmas is approaching, but do not make a habit of it or you could lose all the benefits gained.

After a few weeks, review the schedule to see if it is working. Look at the positive gains and ask: is there any way it could be improved? Can you see a way of creating more time for yourself? Remember: staying with something that is only partially working can become a huge energy drain. Do not be afraid of changing it if you have to.

With thought and planning, bedtime does not have to be an energy-draining time. A routine can give stability for your child, and it also gives you, the parents, a time and space to themselves. A time to build up energy for the hectic festive season ahead.